AD AMERICAM
Journal of American Studies
Vol. 8, 2007
ISSN 1896-9461
ISBN 978-83-233-2533-8

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THINKING AS AN ANTIDOTE TO EVIL: REFLECTIONS ON THE IDEAS OF HANNAH ARENDT

To think and to be fully alive are the same thing.
Hannah Arendt

Two events make us reflect today on the thought of Hannah Arendt. The first is that in late 2006 a century had passed since the author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was born. The second is the launch of the Polish edition of her new book, *Responsibility and Judgment* (Arendt, Warszawa 2006).

The centenary of her birth is a good occasion for conducting at least a general overview of Arendt's most absorbing ideas. As is well known, she achieved fame thanks to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951); an important book, in which she came up with the concept of total power, while also presenting a strong thesis on the comparability of Fascism and Stalinism. It is worth mentioning that this was the cause of the first publisher rejecting her text.

Arendt's next major work was *The Human Condition* (1958). In it, the philosopher presents the reevaluation that took place in the Modern Age – the reversal of the traditional hierarchical order of *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* (Arendt 2000: 313). Nowadays, we have grown used to perceiving work as the most precious of values. This allows us to indulge in our second passion – consumption. Arendt points out the fact that we trust more in "action" than in "contemplation and observation." When we act, we tend to suppress thinking. When we stop thinking, we refrain from making judgments, and so are in danger of creating fertile ground for the spread of evil.

It is clear that Arendt would have come across the great importance of contemplation in human life while working on her doctorate on the thought of Saint Augustine. The author of *Confessions*, in his reflections on work (which are similar to those of the other Church Fathers) recommends combining physical and mental work. He also argues that a good profession (for example, that of craftsman or farmer) does not fully occupy a man, so he has enough time and energy to contemplate "higher ends." This aspect of existence is diametrically opposed to the situation in which modern man finds himself – his absorption in work deadens his contem-

plative life. This is quite alien to the citizens of Ancient Greece, who were not occupied by the pursuit of daily needs or distracted by mundane chores. Indeed, this train of thought alone is sufficient to reveal that Arendt's outlook springs, ideologically, from the culture of Ancient Greece. While discussing the similarity between the views of the author of *On the Will* and the thesis of the author of *The City of God* it is necessary to point out another theme of her reflections – the problem of thinking. She repeats, after Augustine, that thinking is an activity led by love towards that which exists, whereas evil destroys that which exists. It follows that thinking inclines us to protest against wrongdoing because evil destroys that which exists.

THINKING AND EVIL

Here we approach Arendt's fundamental concept, formulated in the subheading of her next book – *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Before she became an adherent of this thesis she had taken a position in defense of the existence of radical evil. Such was her initial conclusion when examining the nature of totalitarianism – being unable to understand mass murders committed without a comprehensible motive, she talked about absolute evil.[1] But in 1961, influenced by Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem, where she worked as a reporter for *The New Yorker*, she changed her point of view. Trying to understand the evil done by Eichmann, and after a stormy exchange of thoughts in her letters (including, crucially, with her teacher Karl Jaspers), she formulated her famous thesis on "the banality of evil." Although she emphasized the originality of this expression on numerous occasions, it first appears in Karl Jaspers' correspondence with Arendt (Arendt 1993). This finding should not deprive her of the merit for having carried out the diagnosis and portrayed the phenomenon. We might say, a little disingenuously, that as a matter of fact the use of Jaspers' expression confirms another of Arendt's opinions – on the communicative aspect of human existence. It is thanks to the exchange of thoughts that we are able to verbalize our own point of view.[2] In addition, more of Jaspers' ideas are echoed in Arendt's outlook; for example, his refusal to credit Hitler with "the satanic greatness" to which he was, after all, aspiring. Jaspers denies the depth of Hitler's thought and his power of intention. Hitler should not be put on a par with other criminals, not even with the literary characters of Dostoyevsky's novels (Raskolnikov or Stavrogin) who would think out the greatest crimes in order to achieve greatness.

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[1] After the experience of World War I and his observation of human activity, Sigmund Freud formulated a thesis concerning human nature. He left no illusions and stated that man is capable of doing evil without hesitation. Plus, if he can benefit from it, he will not analyze if damage done to others in order to achieve a goal is going to be proportional to the profit gained (see: Freud 1992: 93–94). It is worth mentioning that Arendt was granted the Sigmund Freud Award.

[2] It has already been noted by Ludwig Feuerbach that dialogue opens up the possibility of searching for truth – along with another person we are given a sensually experienced reality and thanks to dialogue we are able to check our ability to perceive it, and are also able to be certain of its existence.

In *Responsibility and Judgment* – a book recently published in Poland, which gathers together all but one of the essays and lectures completed after the Eichmann trial, while searching for an answer to the nature of evil, our philosopher notes that Eichmann was not a monster or a cruel beast personifying absolute evil. She had already stated in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* that "even with the greatest goodwill it is impossible to see in Eichmann any diabolic or demonic depth" (Arendt 1987: 371). When she sees this ordinary, conscientious bureaucrat she comes to a different conclusion from before – the evil is not absolute, but stems above all from an incapacity for thought. As a result of his thoughtlessness, Eichmann played out the role of the biggest criminal of our times.[3] Being only a "mindless cog" in the bureaucratic machinery of a totalitarian regime, he underwent the dehumanization visible in his ceasing to think. As Helmuth Plessner's political anthropology holds, what distinguishes a man from other beings is his full capacity for reflection (Plessner 1994).

The key question is – what functions as an antidote to evil? Thinking, of course. Thinking is an activity that "has particular moral consequences – someone who thinks constitutes him or herself as a person or personality" (Arendt 2006: 134). The initiation of a thought process is a precondition for making a judgment. When we restrain from expressing an opinion we fail to castigate evil and thus allow it to spread. The message that emerges from Arendt's latest book is that we should not lose the ability to react by making judgments of whether a given occurrence is worthy to exist in our world or not. This leads us on to the next conclusion, which is that it is best for the public sphere, politics, if as many opinions as possible are expressed. This, of course, brings to mind the idea of a public debate. The classic authors of liberalism assumed that human beings are to some extent rational; they believed that public debate (for example, a plenary debate in parliament) makes it possible to construct political truth out of these rational elements. Of course this is only under the condition that a proper discussion takes place, with a clash of opposing standpoints.

However, it needs to be pointed out that thinking as a remedy for evil, as proposed by Arendt, bears features of idealism. If we look more closely at everyday situations we might ask when people make an effort to think. This happens when they are forced by some sort of necessity, when a problem arises. In postulating permanent thinking, Arendt again appears as a follower of ancient culture. It was in Ancient Greece that citizens had at their disposal something facilitating reflection – free time. As we know, at that time the economy was based on slavery, which exempted proprietors from the struggle for daily bread. How could anyone today – without proper economic security – spend two weeks deliberating, as Arendt did with her masters, Heidegger and Jaspers, over the sentence "ein guter Vefrs ist ein guter Vers"? The author of *The Human Condition* is a contemporary Greek. The

[3] Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil has caused a lot of controversy. After the publication of the book on the Eichmann trial, she lost a lot of friends. Even today, the book results in many polemics. Recently N. Mailer raised it in his book about Hitler – *The Castle in the Forest* (2007). In essence, Mailer's book is based on a dispute with Arendt's theses. He rejects her concept because it underestimates the evil in the world. He claims that a thesis on the banality of evil is more dangerous than claiming that evil is satanic, because in this case the struggle between good and evil is discarded. Mailer obviously favors a Manichean outlook on the world.

ideas she proposes do not fit easily with the spirit of our times. Jaspers, her master, seems to be closer to a diagnosis of modernity than her. He claimed that a man lets external situations prevail on him without any reflection on his part, and that only under the influence of stimuli does he start the process of thinking (and therefore the process of returning to oneself). Jaspers defined these circumstances as "limit situations." They include: death, struggle, suffering and guilt. According to Jaspers a man is distinguished not by who he in fact is, but by what he creates from himself both in the process of thought and of action.

POLITICS

The issue of the communicative aspect of existence has already been raised. However, it must be emphasized that it also relates to the realm of politics. Arendt goes back to the Greek (more precisely, Aristotelian) understanding of politics as action and speech. The political situation is one of conversation. Politics takes place when we create the law and institutions; for example, when we want to build a school or a hospital and, through discussion and negotiation, that is conversation, we reach certain conclusions. Moreover, politics has an anthropological aspect as well. In politics we reveal ourselves, and, more precisely – our ability to make judgments and therefore, *de facto,* our ability to think. This is how thought, the foundation of Arendt's political philosophy, is revealed. Therefore politicality is a conversation; politicality is created in situations where there is an equality of sides and one talks while the other listens; politicality assumes that the opinions of others are taken into account. Political power is understood by Arendt as an ability to act communicatively, which is endangered by violence. According to Arendt politics ends where violence begins. This is another indication of her inspiration coming from Greek ideas. So in trying to find the causes of a contemporary political crisis (the dissolution of democratic power), she came to the conclusion that they lie in the blurring of the distinction between the private and public spheres. In ancient times violence existed in the private sphere because of a lack of equality, but in the public sphere there was no violence and the rule of equality was in force. In modern times the masses succumbed to ideologies postulating the broadening of the political sphere (the masses being granted political freedom) and introducing equality into the private sphere, which created the basis for revolution. As a result of the leveling of the difference between these spheres, equality and the principle of non-violence no longer hold in the public sphere.

Returning to Arendt's thesis on the appearance of violence being the end of politics, and to her idea of politics as a dialogue between equivalent subjects, it should be pointed out that historical experience teaches us quite the opposite. We learn that man shows an inclination to domination that is difficult to resist and is revealed at every step: "as a result of congenital traits, people themselves always, everywhere and openly rule over those who they are stronger than" (Tukidydes 2004, vol. 2: 470–471) It is extremely difficult to achieve a situation in which there is an equal dialogue. We differ because of many factors, including social status and education. It has recently been shown by Michel Foucault that even in a doctor's surgery, when both the doctor and patient are bound by a joint interest (the patient's recovery),

domination comes into play – the doctor possessing knowledge, possesses power. Furthermore, power hierarchizes and is inclined to extend its sphere of influence. After all, violence itself, in all its possible forms, is difficult to eradicate from the public sphere.

PHILOSOPHY VERSUS POLITICS

This question leads us back to one of Arendt's most ambitious books – *The Human Condition* – in which she tries to separate pure philosophy from thinking about politics. She emphasizes the difference between the high expectations of the private sphere's *vita contemplativa* and the different set of values of the public sphere's *vita activa*. This is why she outlines the character of public life's distinct vocabulary, which is subject to its own rules. It might be mentioned in passing that Arendt did not see herself as a philosopher, but as a political theorist. When a journalist introduced her as a "philosopher," she protested that she did not feel like one and did not think that other philosophers would accept her into their circle. Naturally, this was modesty speaking, but she also had a concrete aim – to expose an inevitable tension between philosophy and politics. Arendt's aspiration and aim was, as she used to say, to analyze politics "with an eye un-blurred by philosophy." In her opinion, it is difficult for intellectuals to think about politics clearly as they see everywhere the operation of ideas.

It is difficult to disagree with her when it comes to the division of philosophy and politics. This is not an isolated opinion in the history of ideas. Spinoza had already made similar comments: "It is obvious that politicians have written about political matters far more adeptly than philosophers" (Spinoza 2000: 335). This is mainly because philosophers think in absolute categories, while ignoring that which exists. They do not perceive people as they are, but as they would like them to be.

PRINCIPLES

The problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics correlates with Arendt's belief that there are no general principles that with any degree of certainty could be applied to concrete examples. According to her, there are no general criteria that would allow us to formulate judgments in a reliable manner. We may remark that this idea has been well known since ancient times. It was not only Aristotle (the philosopher most highly valued by Arendt) who noted in his *Nichomachean Ethics* (Book V, 7 1134b) that fire burned both there and among the Persians, but that justice differed. The Sophists had themselves already stated that the essence does not lie in the correctness of one ethical theory or another, but in the degree of applicability. Protagoras emphasized that for a given nation at a given time given customs and principles were best. According to him, there are no absolute political standards. They change according to place, time and circumstances. Similarly, Gorgias, another Sophist, emphasized that it is impossible to unconditionally define what is appropriate and what is not. This can only be defined by practice. He came to the conclu-

sion that our actions depend on circumstances. The ideas of the Sophists do not seem to differ from the intention of the author of *Truth and Lying in Politics*. For her, the problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics took on the form of the relationship between theory and practice and thought and action. This dissonance was observed by Spinoza: "A conviction has arisen that of all the applied sciences politics is the one in which theory most departs from practice" (Spinoza 2000).

HISTORY

Responsibility and Judgment contains another of Arendt's polemical thoughts. It involves, namely, our relationship to History. Arendt claims that analogies from the past cannot be of any help to us in solving present-day crises. To justify this opinion she points out that political activity is characterized by chance, which limits the use of analogy. She emphasizes its dependence on actual circumstances. Of course she did not mean to dispute the importance of the past: "The world we live in at the moment, is the world of the past; it consists of the souvenirs and remains of what people have done (for good or bad)" (Arendt 2006: 299). She rejects, however, the possibility of using "the lesson of history" in predicting the future and remarks, ironically, that if history teaches us anything, it is as murky as the prophecies of the Delphic Oracle.

I agree with Arendt that when it comes to particular political situations drawing a simple historical analogy is inaccurate.[4] It seems to me, however, that historical analogies are extremely useful when examining the mechanism of political systems. It is enough to cite Book 8 of Plato's *Republic* to see that the critique of democracy is to a large extent applicable to the mechanisms of twentieth-century democracies. Arendt herself, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, draws our attention to particular symptoms of power changes, in order to predict what they could lead to. The importance of historical arguments in the realm of politics is also noteworthy. Knowing that past actions brought about a certain result, we could perform them again in order to achieve analogical or similar effects. Historical argumentation is of great didactic importance – nothing captures our imagination more than well-chosen examples from history. After all, historical reference plays a role in political propaganda. It can, for example, antagonize relations between countries.

There are many significant ideas in Arendt's writings; for example, her extremely valuable analysis of the social and emotional mechanisms of revolutionary movements in *On Revolution* (1963). However, in these reflections I have followed Arendt's own postulate and applied the criterion of writing only about those ideas which forced me to think.

Nazism and Stalinism are long gone, as is the Eichmann trial and the polemics between Arendt and, for example, Gershom Scholem. But her postulate of not refraining from the challenge of thinking, as being essential to our humanity, is no less relevant today. We must, after the Epicureans (as emphasized by the author of *On the Will*), keep repeating to ourselves their command, *lathē biōsas* – "live secretly."

[4] As G. Mosca says, the Rome of Machiavelli differs from the republican one.

Thinking is a distinct, if invisible, activity, which perhaps for that very reason allows us to fool others (or even ourselves) that we are up to the task.

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